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ABSTRACT

Teaching is a form of public service that may give personal fulfillment to those who are involved in it. It is important to highlight the personal dimensions of teaching along with the professional dimensions to help illustrate the teacher's role as a public servant. This paper discusses the practice of one Portuguese kindergarten teacher "Ana" observed throughout almost two years using ethnographic methodologies. Excerpts from field notes and interviews illustrate how Ana derived personal satisfaction from her teaching and how she perceived her teaching as a "moral act" and therefore a public service. Finally, the paper explores how Ana's "voice" can become a pedagogical tool for others. (Contains 53 references.) (Author/HTH)

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"I am like this because I just can't be different. . ." Personal and Professional Dimensions of Ana's Teaching: Some Implications for Teacher Education

Teresa Vasconcelos

Abstract

Teaching is a form of public service that may give personal fulfillment to those who are involved in it. It is important to highlight the personal dimensions of teaching along with the professional dimensions to help illustrate the teacher's role as a public servant. This paper discusses the practice of one Portuguese kindergarten teacher—Ana—observed throughout almost two years using ethnographic methodologies. Excerpts from field notes and interviews illustrate how Ana derived personal satisfaction from her teaching and how she perceived her teaching as a "moral act" and therefore a public service. Finally, the paper explores how Ana's "voice" can become a pedagogical tool for others.

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Teresa Vasconcelos

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To Lilian Katz

It is through others
That we develop into ourselves
(L. S. Vygotsky, 1930/1981)

...That the teaching act becomes
The resonance of all our being
(Sylvia Ashton-Warner, 1963)

All what I do is connected with the interpretative world.
Really, it is a very constructed world.
I am very interested, not in what we see,
But in what we think we see,
As we feel what we think we see, what it is....
It is small symbols, nothing of great,
But collectively they create the context, the real thing....
What I was doing was not related with sculpture
Or with an artistic strategy.
I was trying to understand what life was.
(Matt Mullican, sculptor, 1999)

Teaching is a form of public service that may bring personal fulfillment to those who are involved in this profession (Katz, 1995; 1984; Spodek, Saracho, & Peters, 1988). Yet such personal fulfillment, the development of a sense of doing a public service, is not accomplished without inner struggles, difficult choices, self-clarification, an enlarged sense of one's own profession. I suggest that a teacher is a caring citizen who works not only for her rights and dignity to be respected—out of respect for herself—but also to nurture within herself a deep sense of social responsibility, of care, of deep attention to the other. Pedagogy, according to Readings (1996), is as simple as a "network of obligation ...[in which] the condition of pedagogical practice is an infinite attention to the other" (p. 158).

There is limited research about what makes a good early childhood or elementary school teacher (Ayers, 1989; Yonemura, 1986; Clandinin, 1985). Most of the studies that look at good teachers simply develop lists

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of behaviors and skills and try to find the "expert teacher," as if it would be possible to clone the good ones. Teaching is far more complex. Yet, we may learn how to find an inner sense of our profession as a kind of caring citizenship from stories of master teachers and their descriptions of their own inner and professional paths. Life stories and biographies of teachers may help us to understand the teaching profession (Goodson, 1992a, 1992b; Carter, 1993).

This paper will attempt to describe how a Portuguese kindergarten[1] teacher has built a sense of her own profession as a caring citizen. Goodson (1992a) considers that "it is clear we still have an underdeveloped literature on the personal, biographical, and historical aspects of teaching" (p. 234). The teacher's "voice" (Goodson, 1992a, 1992b), the "voices" of people who know her, including the researcher's voice, will be interwoven, as we will attempt to give a picture of who Ana is, her own very inner perceptions of who she is, how she understands her profession and her role with children. A set of vignettes from the field notes and interviews (with Ana and with other people) will illustrate how Ana gets personal satisfaction from her teaching and how she perceives her teaching as a "moral act" (Tom, 1984) and, therefore, a public service (Hansen, 1995). Finally, we will explore how Ana's "voice" can become a "pedagogical tool" for others. Implications will be drawn for my present work as a teacher trainer, both in preservice teacher education and inservice and continuous teacher education.

The present work is drawn from a larger study (Vasconcelos, 1997a) about Ana's practice as a kindergarten teacher and her group of twenty 3- through 6-year-old children. The metaphor of a "large table" emerged from the study and was developed elsewhere (Vasconcelos & Walsh, in press), as a way of building community and a sense of citizenship with very young children. Using biographical (Smith, 1994) and ethnographic methods (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), I, as researcher, "visited" Ana, the teacher, for almost two years of naturalistic observations, using "thick description" (Geertz, 1973)[2] and an interpretive interactionist approach (Denzin, 1989) to her life[3] and her work with the children, and by interviewing her and people around her (family, colleagues, mentors, etc.). "Epiphanies" were recollected that helped to elucidate Ana's personal and professional path (Denzin, 1989).[4] A social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1986, 1978; Wertsch, 1989; Bruner, 1996, 1990, 1986; Bruffee, 1986)—the awareness that realities are socially constructed—and a feminist perspective on teaching (Carter, 1993; Whiterell & Noddings, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1993; Walsh, Baturka, Colter, & Smith, 1991; Weiler, 1994) guided our analysis of Ana's practice. Therefore, researching Ana was an attempt to visit a teacher's life and work with the voice of that same teacher (Goodson, 1992a, 1992b; Ball & Goodson, 1985) and represented a deep challenge for myself as a researcher and as a teacher educator. This is the reason why Ana' s voice continues to haunt my work as a researcher (Vasconcelos, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, in press; Vasconcelos & Walsh, in press) and as a teacher educator (Vasconcelos, 2000b).

Voices of Ana and about Ana

> Day after day, I enter *Figueirinha* [the kindergarten] as if it were a refreshing oasis after the harsh heat of a desert. A sort of Shangri-La. Ana sits, as usual, around the Large Table with the children. Vasco arrives with his father: "There is our Vasco!" greets Ana. Vasco sits among his friends and informs "I have news to tell: My mother showed me crickets last night." "Crickets, crickets!" repeat the other children. "Yes, crickets," emphasizes Ana, the teacher: "When I was a child, I used to go in the evenings to listen to them and make them come out of their little hole in the ground." "I want to draw a cricket," decides Joana. "We need to look in the books, to see what they look like," insists Vasco. Ana writes what the children are saying on a large piece of paper. (field notes)

> When I was a child, I suffered because I think I didn't like myself enough. One of the things I treasure is that children feel accepted as they are … more specifically those children who have been emotionally or socially and economically deprived…. What I want a child to learn is that she can be herself and should leave the early childhood classroom [experience] with an inner strength. This inner strength is built day after day…. In kindergarten, all children should have an opportunity. (Ana, interview)

These excerpts provide the context of the study at a glance. Ana is a well-respected, experienced early childhood educator, who has been working as a cooperating teacher at my university. She has more than 30 years of experience with children. She participates regularly in the activities of a cooperative teachers' movement, the *Movimento da Escola Moderna* (MEM, Modern School Movement), created in Portugal by Sérgio Niza (Nóvoa, 1992; Nóvoa & Vilhena, 1996) under the inspiration of French pedagogue Célestin Freinet[5]:

> When I got to know the *Movimento da Escola Moderna*, I just thought that, as a person, I identified much more with the Movement than with the practice that I had learned at my teachers training college.... When I found the *Movimento*, I found an echo, people that spoke the same language as myself. I saw other colleagues working, and I identified with the *Movimento*. I started reading Freinet's materials.... I liked him because, as a classroom teacher, he would let free flying pigeons inside his classroom. (Ana, interview)

Goodson (1992a) considers that in order "to understand something so intense and personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is..." (p. 234). Ana explains her caring attitude and her love for nature from her childhood, raised on a farm in the northeast part of rural Portugal:

> As a child, I loved to help my grandmother feed the chicks: cutting the greens, mixing them with corn flour and boiling water; it was this way we would feed the chickens. I loved the little chicks; I even would bring them into my bed. (Ana, interview)

She recalls, from a very early age, her uneasiness when she saw those living well (like her family) side by side with the poor. With her first salary as a professional, she bought bed covers for the poor workers on her family farm located in the interior north of Portugal:

> How can we make sermons about the gospels and leave the farmers living in misery? The gospels call forth equality, dignity, and justice for all. (Ana, interview)

Ana became an early childhood educator because her sister told her that it could be an interesting profession for her. When she was attending a Catholic school, the nuns would put her in charge of the younger children:

> The Head of my teacher training college used to say that I could not have chosen a more appropriate profession, I was born for that.... I received from her a sense of my profession: in her very peculiar style, she emphasized the *moral value* of the unique human being, she treasured an education for citizenship. (Ana, interview)

Ana explains her love for her profession as being a deep part of her life:

> If I didn't treasure my profession so much—for example, when I traveled for a week in Morocco during vacation—I would not have brought those artifacts (objects, cards, materials...) and developed a project with the children. Some colleagues tell me: "How is that possible? Only you, Ana!" This means that I probably love my profession, don't you think? (Ana, interview)

Maria, Ana's daughter, in an interview, comments about her mother as a professional:

> On a professional level, I think it must be wonderful to be doing what one likes to do, to feel fulfilled in one's profession. My mother will soon be 51, and I can't simply imagine her retired, sitting on a couch in front of TV, doing nothing.... It must be really good when one does what she really likes to do. (Maria, Ana's daughter, interview)

Her connection with the *Movimento da Escola Moderna* was a very important epiphany (Denzin, 1989) in her professional career. The binding to a cooperative teachers' movement with tremendous emphasis on pedagogy *and* culture was of vital importance for her personal and professional development:

> I felt they were tuned with my way of being, my personality. I started that process of identification ... then we start applying those things without even remembering that we are applying what we have read, you know? I felt that the *Movimento* had a lot to do with me... The most important things were those meetings and the cultural events organized around them. The

> meetings happened alternately. As teachers, we would interact in the same classrooms where we used to work, experimenting with materials and visiting each other's classrooms, since we learn a lot by just seeing. We actually used the same methods we used with the children: to plan what we were going to do, to do it, to evaluate. So whatever we used with the kids, we first experimented with that among ourselves, as teachers. There were also moments when we shared with each other what we were doing with the children. At times, it was hard when others criticized our work; we were all learning how to do it. (Ana, interview)

But, she insists, "the leaders had a strong scientific basis, and they would share that knowledge with others, in small groups, so that we all could learn" (Ana, interview). MEM is a movement that affirms teachers' strengths, providing them with a sense of togetherness and of belonging, as they discuss their practice with their peers. They still meet every other Saturday, and Niza continues to be their leader (Nóvoa & Vilhena, 1996).

Ana synthesizes her connection with MEM this way:

> My passage through my teacher training college was a moral passage. My passage through *Movimento da Escola Moderna* was a conscious passage, a philosophical choice; it was there that I learned that politics is not separated from life. (Ana, interview)

After several other jobs, she accepted a position at a cooperative day care center where she learned to develop real teamwork. Then she applied to the public kindergarten of *Figueirinha* where she worked for 18 years until her retirement:

> I came to *Figueirinha* with that experience of doing real teamwork at the cooperative day care center. So somebody who brings that must necessarily bring intensity to a group. And it was also part of my way of being, this dynamism. We tried—we were four teachers—to create, since the beginning, real teamwork, and when we start doing that, we can't just give up. (Ana, interview)

> Work for me is like my second home.... You know, I feel so good, so good, after having arranged the space in the classroom; I like to have a pleasant place to work, you see? (deep emotion). Tears come to my eyes when I speak about this because it is the truth.... The work environment has to be pleasant so that I like living there. If I like being there, then I pass that feeling onto the children, don't I? For example: having soft music playing. For me, listening to classical music makes the environment restful. Once a colleague told me that all my classroom equipment and materials were old.... She didn't understand, you see? The children would dress the dolls with my daughter's old baby clothes, and I would use some of her old toys ... and the children would not destroy them ... they were Maria's toys when she was a baby.... I can't see those things as old-fashioned.... Do we really need to go to sophisticated shops and buy the latest fashion toys or educational materials? It is like when I was raising Maria. She didn't need lots of toys. Her preferred one was a child-sized car with wheels where she would sit on and roll around. Her father had built it.... (Ana, interview)

Despite being a caring, committed teacher, Ana cares also for herself as a person, while avoiding a totally selfish attitude that has proved to be destructive in the caring professions (Leavitt, 1994). Cristina, one of the mothers, a simple doorwoman, who was rather close to Ana, explains:

> What is extraordinary is that Ana is so deeply interested in what she does.... We can spot that she likes her profession, that she is in the right place. And my daughter loves her so much, she is being helped and stimulated by Ana.... I trust Ana's experience ... because she is also a mother. Therefore, she has been helping raise my child, and I try to follow her advice. (Cristina, interview)

One of the teacher aides describes her cooperation with Ana in the classroom:

> I feel fulfilled when I work with Ana. She trusts me, and she is fair. (Adelaide, classroom helper, interview)

Ana passes this sense of personal fulfillment to the people she works with because of the way she builds teamwork.

"Teaching as a Total Practice of Citizenship"

I attempted to give a glimpse—necessarily limited—of Ana as a woman and as a teacher. The role of her initial training, specifically, the fact of being part of a

cooperative teachers' movement, helped her to become who she presently is. Yet, we may deduct from her descriptions that, from a very early age, she demonstrated love for teaching. It is hard, for Ana, to explain why she teaches the way she does. It is profoundly embedded within her Self:

> I am like this because I can't be different; it is very simple ... I've spent many years of my life thinking that I was good at nothing.... I may not have that encyclopedic culture, but I know that I have something to give to the children.... For me, to educate, it is an art, it is very gratifying for me, and it gives me immense pleasure. I like to watch as children come first into my hands and the way they are now; each one has evolved in different ways.... (Ana, interview)

> In order to live happy, fulfilled, we need joy.... In order to have joy, I have to have things that I like to do, to like what I do everyday. To enjoy the beautiful things that life has to show us.... My being has to be fed on a daily basis with good things, you see? I have this need to think that what happens is not the end.... I like to see people happy. (Ana, interview)

Sérgio Niza, the *Movimento* leader, may have an explanation, a vision of why Ana is who she is, what has deeply structured her teaching:

> The *Movimento* is a space of experimentation and of ongoing meetings, where training happens by multiple sharing among school levels and different disciplinary areas.... Therefore, the professional practice becomes *a total practice of citizenship*; somebody who exercises that practice has in itself a structuring dimension. (Niza, interview)

> When Ana says that she can't separate her professional "I" from her personal "I"... that is the *ethical sense of one's profession*.... It must be what people call vocation ... it is, finally, the personal process of one's identification with her own profession. (Niza, interview)

Several authors describe the identity crisis of teachers as the "object of non-ending debates during the last 20 years ... caused by rational models of teaching which imposed a separation between the personal 'I' and the professional 'I'. The transposition of this attitude from the scientific level into the institutional level has contributed to intensify the control over teachers, underlying their process of underprofessionalization" (Nóvoa, 1992, p. 3).

Walsh comments on Ana's teaching:

> Teaching is an art. However many skills go into it, as do so many skills go into an artist's efforts, the decisions that must be made about when and how to combine these skills, the knowledge to do this is not a technical skill. No doubt it can be learned, but it also comes from one's underlying beliefs and passions about children and the world. (D. T. Walsh, personal communication, April 28, 1994)

Teaching young children implies intensity and involvement on the part of the teacher (Katz, 1977; Hawkins, 1986). Teaching, educating children into citizenship, is Ana's life center, the core of her other activities, her search for meaning in the world (Ayers, 1989). It is her life project (Greene, 1987), her moral act (Tom, 1984). Hansen (1995) speaks of "vocation" as the possibility of an activity to have social value but also to bring a sense of personal fulfillment. According to Hansen (1995):

> the idea of teaching as a vocation calls attention to the personal and service oriented dimensions of the practice that draw people into it, and that enable them to find success despite adversity and difficulty. (p. xiv)

Ana has helped generations of young children and their parents to become meaning makers, authors of their own lives. Her personal and professional life—which cannot possibly be described in all its details in these pages—is a succession of struggles, difficult personal choices, but also a non-ending sense of professional commitment to young children. According to Polakow (1993):

> The most telling stories of at-risk children's success over the past three decades have been narratives of teachers as child watchers, sensitively turning the classroom to the developing child's questions—an existential pedagogy in which the child is encouraged to become a meaning maker, a builder of thoughts, an expressive and curious actor experimenting with the avant-garde of knowledge. (pp. 159-160)

Ana's "Voice" as a Pedagogical Tool for Teacher Education

In the past few months, Ana has retired. Nevertheless, in the School of Education where I teach, Ana just accepted responsibility for a workshop center for helping the "scaffolding"[6] of practicum student teachers, involving cooperating teachers and also helping former students of our School in their professional induction years. She will continue her cooperative work with other professionals and will document this work.

Ana's "voice" and others' "voices" about Ana have been used by myself in initial and graduate training in the Lisbon School of Education. I lead a course on teachers' professional development where graduate students are invited to work on their professional biographies, which are discussed throughout the course among colleagues and with me. The final paper is each student's socially reflected and co-constructed professional biography. The study of Ana is key to this course (Vasconcelos, 1997a).

We continue to have huge dilemmas on how to better train teachers (Katz & Raths, 1993, 1985; Hargreaves, 2000), especially guaranteeing their personal development. First-year initial training students were invited to read Ana's personal and professional biography (Vasconcelos, 1997a, chapter 4). After reading that biography, they started their own personal reflections, bringing visibility to their experiences in their own voices. From the beginning of their training, these young students are being invited to start thinking on their future professional role through the "clarifying act of writing" (Sartre). They are being challenged to "bring what is dangerous and subversive in [their] memories, as a possibility of action for change" (Araújo & Magalhães, 1999, p. 27). This process helps the progressive awakening of their future professional role that emerges from a systematic practice of citizenship (even as students) constructed and created with their own inner voices. According to Bruner (1986, p. 16) "narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions, therefore being a human mode of thinking." Reflected experience (Dewey, 1938/1963; Zeichner, 1983) becomes an essential part of their formation process. They discover voice and the moral and cognitive meaning of that discovery (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Carter, 1993).

For both preservice and graduate students, autobiographical narratives become a reflected appropriation of reality through a metacognitive process. The aim is to help teachers or future teachers to be able to pronounce, like Ana, from the core of their beings: "I am like this because I just can't be different." They are invited to integrate "their inner voices with the voice of reason, of the passionate reason" (Ruddick, 1984, p. 142) so that "the teaching act becomes the resonance of all [their] being" (Ashton-Warner, 1963).

Life stories can therefore become *pedagogical tools* for teacher education. The following are some of the refreshing, young voices of our preservice training students (Vasconcelos, 2000b):

> A teacher cannot be two persons; one that teaches the children, the other who has a family back home. Those two persons are interwoven. The teacher has to be able to unite those two facets.
>
> The teacher, above all has to conciliate her own needs with the interests of students, in a way that both feel well developing their tasks. A teacher should never forget that the activities have to be organized *with* her students and not *for* her students.
>
> Becoming a teacher is not a profession from 9 to 6. It is a choice. A mode of living.
>
> Just as a student will not learn if he or she feels sad, no teacher can fulfill her or his profession if her human condition, her thinking, will not be at peace.
>
> There is a moment in our lives when we feel the need for thinking autonomously, on our own, despite paying attention to other people's perspectives. We need to act according to our *inner consensus*.

Ana found her "inner consensus" through her mastery teaching. She will continue, in the future, her "caring citizenship" helping younger generations of teachers. Teaching is for her an "ethical act" of deep responsibility towards the children (and, presently, towards future teachers). French philosopher Lévinas comes to mind in these last words:

> My responsibility never ceases ... nobody can do instead of me. I am responsible of a total responsibility, which answers for all the others, and for all that belongs to the others, even for their responsibility.... Responsibility is what I am supposed to do and that *humanly* I can't refuse. Responsibility is the supreme dignity of the human being. (Lévinas, 1988, p. 93)

I will end this paper with the translation of a sonnet by Portuguese poet Miguel Torga. It tells us about universal citizenship, commitment, and social responsibility. It recalls Ana. But it recalls also the figure of an amazing teacher educator, an inspiring writer, communicator, and researcher, to whom this paper is dedicated. A profound woman, a dear mentor of mine, my family: Lilian Katz. I chose and translated this poem for her:

Universalidade

Aqui declaro que não tem fronteiras.
Filho da sua pátria e do seu povo,
A mensagem que traz é um grito novo
Um metro de medir coisas inteiras

Redonda e quente como um grande abraço
De pólo a pólo, a sua humanidade,
Tendo raízes e localidade,
É um sonho aberto que fugiu do laço.

Vento da primavera que semeia
Nas montanhas, nos campos e na areia
A mesma lúcida semente,

Se parasse de medo no caminho
Também parava a vela do moinho
Que mói depois o pão de toda a gente.

(Miguel Torga, *Nihil Sibi*)

Being Universal

Here I declare she has no boundaries.
Daughter of her country and of her people,
The message she brings is a yet unheard scream:
A meter that measures whole things.

From North to South, her humanity is
Round, warm as a wide embrace,
With roots and a place,
She is a dream open that can't be laced.

Spring winds sowing seeds
Over the mountains, the fields or the sand:
The same bright seed.

If, in fear, she would happen to stop upon her path,
So would the windmill block
The mill that grinds everyone's bread.

(Miguel Torga, *Nihil Sibi*,
translation T. Vasconcelos & I. Allegro)

Notes

[1]In Portugal, kindergartens are usually separate settings from primary schools, and they receive children from 3 through 6 years old. They are led by specialized early childhood educators.

[2]"Thick description," a term introduced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), has been defined by Denzin (1989) as going "beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context and emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard" (p. 83).

[3]At the heart of interpretive interactionism is thick description. Thick interpretation and deep authentic understanding help to make "the world of problematic lived experience of ordinary people directly available to the reader" (Denzin, 1989, p. 7).

[4]Denzin (1989), inspired by James Joyce's novels, describes epiphanies as "those interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives ... have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person" (p. 15).

[5]The Modern School Movement (MEM) is a cooperative teachers' movement founded in Portugal by Sérgio Niza and colleagues during the late sixties based on the pedagogy of French educator Célestin Freinet. During the years of Portuguese dictatorship, this Movement acted as a very important forum and setting for teacher organization—unions were then forbidden. MEM has a strong political and pedagogical commitment, and after democracy (1974), the Movement has been an important partner for new policies around early and primary years education.

[6]I use here the term scaffolding in the sense given by Bruner and associates (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) to indicate the situation where adults support children so they may extend their competencies and present knowledge to higher levels of competency and knowledge. In a recent paper, I adapted this concept to pedagogical practice and supervision of student teachers (Vasconcelos, 1999).

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